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THE HISTORICAL CHARACTER OF THE NARRATIVES OF THE PATRIARCHS.

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II.

A second argument for the unhistorical character of the narrative of this period is the lateness of the date at which the traditions of the patriarchs were committed to writing. According to the dominant school of criticism of the day, the oldest documents of the Hexateuch were not composed before the eighth or the seventh century B. C. Even if they had been written at the time of Moses, they would be long posterior to the events and would be hard to trust; coming from the time of Hosea or of Isaiah, they cannot claim the least historical credibility.

In regard to this argument it should be noticed, first of all, that in the *dating* of the documents of the Pentateuch we are upon the disputed ground of the higher criticism of the Old Testament. It may be that substantial unity has been reached in the analysis of the documents, particularly of the P element, but no such unanimity exists in regard to the dating of these elements. When a critic of the reputation of Professor König can hold, in his recent Introduction to the Old Testament, that E belongs to the period of the Judges and that J need not have been written later than the time of Solomon, it is evident that the historical problem is not yet solved, although the literary problem seems to be approaching solution. It cannot be said that the origin of most of the narratives of the patriarchs in the middle of the period of the Kings has yet been proved; the personal opinion of the writer of this article is that they have a much greater antiquity. However, to argue this point would require a book rather than a review article, and since the theory of the later date is the current one, it is better for apologetic reasons to discuss the question from this stand-point.

Granted that JE, which is the main source of the story of the patriarchs, first originated in the eighth century B. C., does it follow from this that it is unhistorical? Not necessarily, it seems to me. It may be that a record which is itself late was based upon earlier written sources and consequently is more ancient in substance than it is in form. There is a very real distinction, which is often ignored by modern critics, between the age of the contents of a book and the age of the composition. Indications of earlier records within JE are not wanting, although it is impossible to indicate the limits of these documents with certainty. One thing we may affirm positively, the stories of the patriarchs did not *originate* in the time of the Kings even if they were then first committed to writing. The notion that legends were invented in order to give additional sanctity to the numerous sanctuaries of Israel by bringing them into connection with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, is destitute of historical probability. The sanctuaries may have arisen on the basis of the stories but the stories cannot have arisen on the basis of the sanctuaries. Tradition of this sort is the heritage of a race as a whole, and its poetic form is the product of the race spirit. For this reason it can have its origin only in the earliest period of national existence, when the race is still a unit. Stories of the forefathers and of the origin of the tribe may continue to be handed down after a people has become divided as Israel was, but they do not originate then. Such traditions would be nothing more than myths, and myths are not the products of historical times, but belong to the first stage of human development. At whatever time they were written out, these traditions themselves go back to Israel's primitive period. The only question which can arise is whether it is possible that they should have preserved the memory of the original historical fact through so many generations. What are then some of the circumstances which are favorable to the correct transmission of tradition, and how far did these conditions exist in the case of the patriarchal narratives? History in general shows that the tradition of events is easily lost unless it be associated with some objective aid to memory.

1. One of the most important aids is the connection of an

event with a name. Names persist even when languages or races change, and when the name has arisen out of an historical circumstance, the circumstance will probably remain in memory as long as the name is used. The modern name West Indies, for instance, will always bear witness to the fact that Columbus was looking for a passage to India, apart from any explicit historical testimony to that effect. In ancient times names both of persons and of things were usually significant, and this fact was conducive to the preservation of many valuable historical reminiscences. Now the connection of events with names is a marked feature of the Old Testament record as far as the end of 2 Samuel and this is a strong point in favor of the historicity of the tradition. Probably the story of Moses' rescue from the river owes its preservation to the fact that it is connected with his name by means of the play upon the words *mā-shā* and *mô-shé* to draw out (Ex. 2 : 10) in spite of the fact that the name *mô-shé* was, no doubt, of Egyptian rather than of Hebrew origin.

In the patriarchal history of Genesis nearly every name is associated with an anecdote. The association may be as old as the name, in any case it is very ancient, and is a guarantee for the correct transmission of the tradition from the time of its first appearance. Thus the name Isaac, "laughter," has carried with it through the centuries the memory of the fact that Isaac was a child of his parents' old age (Gen. 21 : 6), and the name Jacob has preserved both the incident of the birth of Rebekah's twins and the way in which one supplanted his brother. The name Israel has been the means of preserving the story of Jacob's remarkable experience at the ford of Jabbok (22 : 28). Names of places also, such as Beersheba (21 : 31), Bethel (28 : 19), Mizpah (31 : 48), and Mahanaim (32 : 2), have kept in existence the stories connected with them in Genesis, and they prove that these stories are not late fictions.

2. Besides names, an important aid for the conservation of tradition is found in the brief pointed sayings which become an integral part of the language of a nation. Proverbs, epigrams and ancient songs furnish a thread on which a great deal of historical matter may be strung. Even as late as the time of David we find

the record of the capture of Jebus coupled with an obscure proverb in regard to the lame and the blind (2 Sam. 5:8), and we rightly infer from this that although the incident is traditional, it is historical. In a similar manner the song of Deborah has preserved a correct memory of the defeat of Sisera, and the stories of Gideon and Samson owe their transmission to the pithy sayings which, on certain great occasions, fell from the lips of these worthies and were repeated ever afterward by their fellow-countrymen.

This kind of association is not wanting in the narrative of the patriarchs. In Gen. 22:14 the current proverb "In the Mount of Yahwè he shall be seen (or one shall appear)" has been the means of preserving to us the beautiful tale of the offering up of Isaac. Compare also the venerable poetic fragment in 25:23; 27:27-29; 27:39 ff., which doubtless, whenever they were repeated, carried with them the story of the circumstances under which they were first spoken.

3. Equally important as conservers of tradition are national customs and religious observances. Wherever in the Christian church the Lord's Supper is celebrated, the fact of Christ's death is commemorated, and apart from all documentary evidence, that celebration will always carry with it the story of the institution and of the meaning of the rite, nor is it conceivable that any important modification should be introduced into the accompanying narrative, however long the time of transmission may be.

So long as Passover existed, Israel could not forget the origin of this institution, and whenever it was celebrated, the story of its historical meaning was sure to accompany it. In a precisely similar way the rite of circumcision was a guarantee of the genuineness of the story of the origin of this observance in faith in a covenant of God, whose outward sign this ceremony was. Even events of little national importance may be connected with national custom and thus escape oblivion. The fate of Jephtha's daughter was remembered in Israel because of its association with the annual lament of the women (Judg. 11:40), and similarly the memory of Jacob's lameness is preserved by connection with

the custom of the Israelites not to eat the sinew of the hip which is upon the hollow of the thigh (Gen. 32: 32).

4. Physical objects, such as trees, wells, stones or altars served also to keep fresh the tradition of historical events. Every European traveler knows what a mass of history is transmitted in purely traditional form in connection with churches, castles and other famous places of antiquity. So long as the Wartburg stands, the story of Luther's forced residence there will be told, and it is not probable that any important modifications will come into the narrative so long as it is told on the original ground. The earlier writings of the Old Testament are full of such local associations and this makes it evident that the first writers of the history of the patriarchs did not invent their narratives, but went carefully about and gathered up traditions as they were told in connection with places and things in different parts of the Holy Land. In Gen. 12: 6 the oak of Moreh, no doubt a venerable landmark in the time of the writer, is the scene of a tradition in regard to the wanderings of Abraham. In 21: 23 the tamarisk tree in Beersheba, which Abraham planted, is the bearer of the tradition in regard to the transaction between Abraham and Abimelech. "The oak of weeping" (35: 8) has preserved the memory of Deborah, Rebekah's nurse, who was known to be buried beneath it. Wells have historical reminiscences connected with them in Gen. 16: 14; 21: 30; 26: 33; and often elsewhere. Stones as mementoes of historical events are referred to in 28: 18; 31: 45-48, and altars in 12: 8; 13: 18; 26: 25, and 35: 1.

There is no reason why traditions which were thus localized might not be transmitted for an indefinitely long time without material modification, and the circumstance that nearly all the traditions in regard to the patriarchs are connected with some such external aid to memory, is strong evidence that they have historical foundation. In view of this fact it seems to me to be possible to affirm that in the patriarchal period, as well as in the Mosaic, we are on historical ground, even if the documents were composed as late as many critics now believe to be the case. Of course if a greater antiquity of the documents can be maintained the historical certainty rises proportionally.

1. Admitting all this, we cannot conceal from ourselves the fact that a history which rests wholly upon traditional sources cannot possess the same degree of exactness as one based upon original documents. Tradition retains only the main incidents and easily loses its hold on minor matters. Even the gospel narratives differ from one another in regard to the details of events in the Old Testament. The numerous double accounts of incidents show what modification may be introduced into a tradition within a comparatively short time. In 1 Sam. 10: 11 f and 19: 24 different accounts are given of the origin of the proverb, "Is Saul also among the prophets?" According to one it was when Saul was on his way home after being anointed by Samuel, according to the other it was when he was going down to Naioth to capture David. 1 Sam. 24 and 26 are generally regarded as parallel accounts of David's sparing Saul's life when he had the opportunity to slay him. According to one it happened when Saul went into a cave where David and his men were hiding, and David cut off a piece of his robe; according to the other it occurred in the camp of Saul, and David took a spear and a cruise of water. Similar instances are found in the patriarchal history. For instance, two accounts are given of the origin of the name Beersheba in Gen. 21: 31 and 26: 33 respectively. Gen. 12: 10-20 and Gen. 20 are probably parallel accounts of the taking away of Sarah from Abraham, the only difference being that in one case it is Pharaoh who does it; in the other, Abimelech, king of Gerar. Cases of this sort show, in the most conclusive manner, that although the main point of an event may be handed down by tradition, the details cannot be accurately transmitted.

2. Candor compels us to recognize also the fact that oral tradition has a tendency to glorify the past, and that this modifies the strictly historical character of the narrative. When the memory of an event depends upon tradition only, it is inevitable that the striking features of this event should be rendered more striking, and that by artistic touches of various narrators the impression should here and there be heightened. We all know from our experience how the story of an episode improves with frequent telling, and how, without loss of the basis of the fact,

the setting of the incident gradually becomes somewhat different from what it was before. This is true on a larger scale in the transmission of history by tradition. The main incidents are all preserved because of national or religious interest in them, but this very interest causes them to be told in such a way as to increase their impressiveness. Even in the later and more certainly historical tradition of the Mosaic period, instances of the embellishing result of oral tradition are not wanting. If such a heightening of tradition can have taken place at so late a time, it is plain that it must also have occurred to a greater or less degree in the history of the patriarchs, although here we are not in the position to recognize it so readily as in the later history. So far as the sacred record has been obliged to depend for its information on traditional sources, it is liable to all the disturbing influences which are a necessary accompaniment of oral tradition. Were this not so, the true humanity of the Bible would be lost, and we should have to assume the Romish theory of an infallible tradition in the Old Testament church as well as in the Christian church. We have no warrant, however, either in Scripture or in reason for such an assumption, and we must conclude, therefore, that the narrative of the patriarchal period has not escaped that modification in detail which is the inevitable fate of all history which depends upon oral transmission.

3. The oral tradition of events carries with it of necessity a subjective coloring. Every time that a story is told it is unconsciously adapted by the narrator, and however early it is recorded, it can never give us the plain prosaic facts of the past, but carries with it a certain poetical element. Tradition is a matter of the feelings and of the disposition of the race which transmits it as well as of the memory. Each age tells the story in the spirit of its own beliefs and aspirations, and thus it grows in beauty, in instructiveness and in ideality. This is the poetic side of tradition. It weakens the strict historical value of the narrative, in the modern sense of the word historical, but it strengthens its religious significance. The central thoughts of the past thus become more prominent than they were in real life. All the details are so arranged as to strengthen the impression of these

thoughts, and a picture is thus produced which is of more value as an example than the plain original. As Professor Hermann Schultz beautifully remarks (*Alttest. Theol.* p. 18), "The main figures of the past become imprints, types of the nationality and of its historical destiny. We are given a glimpse into the inmost heart of the race, and behold there the moving and impelling forces out of which its historical life flows. Hence the ever fresh impressiveness of these narratives, hence the feeling that we are brought into contact with beings of flesh and blood, who are truer than if they were only historical. For this reason no one ever feels so much at home as in history. Here one sits by the hearth in the home of a nation and hears the very breath which it draws."

4. The recording of the earliest traditions of Israel was not a critical process, and this fact also detracts from the strict historical exactness of the narratives of the patriarchs. Among the Hebrews, as among other races, the recording of tradition probably began when it was observed that the memory of antiquity was beginning to die out. This recording was not such an easy process as one might suppose. The would-be historian did not know all the traditions which were current among his people and had to search them out. They were probably the possession of a special class of narrators, as is the case among the Arabs, and were to be obtained in their most exact form only from the lips of these professional guardians of tradition. In different parts of the land in the mouth of different persons the stories varied and the relative value of the traditions had to be estimated and the best one chosen. Most of the tales of the olden times were fragmentary, and one must be used to supplement and explain the other. Historical items and anecdotes of the forefathers were scattered, and the editor was obliged to collect and arrange them. The modern historian would have approached this task in a critical spirit, and would have subjected the heterogeneous matter before him to an analytical investigation, and have endeavored from a comparison of the various elements to construct the exact original historical basis of the tradition. This was not the method of the ancient historian. For him the national tradition was

something far too sacred to be sifted, and even if he had had the wish to investigate it critically, he would not have had the ability. Like all other biblical historians, the gatherers of the traditions of the patriarchs had neither a critical nor a scientific, but a religious aim. The principle on which they have selected and arranged their material was that of edification. They have, it is true, given us very valuable historical information, but this was not their main purpose. If they had had only an historical interest they would never have written. It was the hope of awakening the religious spirit of their own age which led them to gather up the treasures of the religious experience of Israel. To appreciate the true significance of their work we must come to it not in the cold critical spirit of scientific investigation, but with a sympathetic heart and the longing for religious inspiration. Coming in that spirit, we shall rejoice that the first gatherers of the stories of the patriarchs were not critics, and that instead of attempting to separate the objective from the ideal elements, or to distinguish between versions of the same event, they have recorded the tradition for us in all its simplicity and beauty, just as it came from the heart of a race which had experienced God's presence in the past, and was conscious of his abiding grace and direction in the present.